

'Weakness Is Strength'

WASHINGTON

At the Moscow summit of 1974, a Soviet leader did what he could to sustain an American President in the waning days of his power. With the shoe now on the other foot, we will see again how little one super-power can affect the internal turmoil of the other.

Unlike Mr. Nixon, however, Mr. Gorbachev has been using his nation's economic desperation and his own political weakness as the keystone of his negotiating strategy:

Unless you help me with trade, he suggests, and stop supporting the breakaway Baltic States; unless you permit me to modernize my heavy missiles, and delay the withdrawal of my troops from Eastern Europe until Germany is neutralized, perhaps through a security component to C.S.C.E., my replacement for NATO — I will fail and be overthrown by a Stalinist villain.

The latest wrinkle in this Marshal Foch strategy is the Weimar analogy: If you add to our humiliation by making us give up our conquests, you will stimulate resentment that will be exploited by a Soviet Hitler.

Fearful of a who-lost-Gorbachev charge, the Bush Administration seemed on the brink of giving up its position of strength. In Moscow two weeks ago, Secretary Baker accepted a change of priority from the historic ending of Red Army occupation to another nuclear treaty; until Mr. Bush turned to Brent Scowcroft and Robert Gates, it seemed we would offer the desired package of economic aid despite strangulation of the Baltics.

Then came the election of Boris Yeltsin to the presidency of the Russian republic. Overnight, the nature of the threatened alternative to Gorbachev changed.

No longer would we be helping Gorbachev the reformer against the imagined evil emperors of Communist reaction; by making concessions to Gorbachev, we would be helping a dictator remain in place who resists a free-market economy and insists on continued army occupation and heavy-missile advantage.

The most likely alternative is no Sakharov (whom Mr. Bush properly quoted in his welcome), and has as many anti-Semitic connections as does one of Mr. Gorbachev's recent appointees. But he is not the anti-reform poltergeist so often conjured.

On the contrary, says a name-dropping Soviet correspondent hanging around the lobby of the Madison Hotel here, "Boris Nikolayevich is much more radical than Mikhail Sergeyevich."

Boris Yeltsin has been accusing the present regime of half-measures when drastic action is needed, while "Measure seven times, cut once" is the go-slow Gorbachev adage.

Gorbachev's strategy backfires.

On Baltic independence, Mr. Yeltsin is the Russian Jefferson Davis; his first acts were to assert Russian sovereignty and to announce interest in direct negotiations with these independent Baltic nations, undermining the Gorbachev sanctions even as the Soviet leader was threatening "more strict measures."

Nobody knows which way the cat of Kremlin control will jump, but our policy makers now know this: The Russian people, not the apparatchiks or the generals, have changed the likeliest alternative to Gorbachev in a way that removes our impetus to "help Gorbachev."

We should continue to say, as Mr. Bush does so often, that "we want perestroika to succeed," because a prosperous free market in Russia and its confederated republics are in everyone's interest. The bone in the Kremlin's throat is giving up central control.

Mikhail Sergeyevich, for all his eloquence about the pain of transition, is not the man of the future because he is a specialist in the inside acquisition of control. A physicist-economist brought into town this week to push Soviet economic weakness blurted out the truth: "Only a popular government can undertake unpopular measures."

That was untrue for 70 years, but it's true today: leaders who draw their support directly from popular majorities in elections can impose temporarily unpopular policies; the people will grumble but will bear the burden without revolt because the choice was their own.

Gorbachev fears elections because he is not one who delivers. He broke the sclerotic grip of the Communist Party, but shrinks from delivering the free system that would have put bread on the table; he abandoned the corrupt puppets of the Soviet empire, but has not delivered the end of Red Army occupation.

After a decade of gaining complete personal control, the great improvisationist could not differentiate between stability and stagnation. The Soviet leader deserves gratitude for shaking up his world, but not the help he demands to relieve the pressure for more freedom.

"Weakness is strength" was this too-cautious compromiser's most daring maneuver. Some of us have begun to miss him already. □